

Maria Bogucka (*Warsaw*)

FAIRS IN EARLY MODERN POLAND

1. GENERAL REMARKS

According to J. Gilissen's definition fairs are important regular, free meetings of merchants coming together from distant regions.¹ The main differences between fairs (Polish: jarmarki, German: Jahrmarkt, French: foires, Dutch: jaarmarkten) and markets are listed below:

Fairs

1. mostly one–four times a year long–distance trade (exchange between regions)
2. luxury items, mostly foreign products
3. large scale operations (merchant–merchant)
4. credit operations
5. freedom for merchant's activities, suspension of privileges granted to citizens

Markets

1. once or twice weekly local trade (town–countryside exchange)
2. mostly local products
3. small retail trade (merchant–consumer or producer)
4. petty cash operations
5. limited freedom for merchants' activities

As far as gender relation is concerned it should be stressed that fairs represented male-dominated time and space, while at markets participation of females was very high, both as sellers and buyers.

In this study I shall concentrate on fairs, excluding the problem of markets and local trade.

¹ Gilissen, *The Notion of the Fair in the Light of the Comparative Method*, in: *La Foire. Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, vol. 5, Bruxelles 1953, p. 334.

2. MAIN FACTORS OF FAIRS DEVELOPMENT IN POLAND IN THE 16TH-MID 17TH CENTURY

The rise of world economy in the 16th century was based on the emergence of regional differences and stimulated by the growing exchange between regions and countries.² "There is scarcely a period in the history of Europe when trade plays so central a role as in the years from 1500 to 1750" – affirms K. Glamman.³ Poland in those times was involved not only in the Baltic trade and grain exports; a large overland trade was conducted through the Polish territories, linking the West of Europe with the Eastern parts of the continent as well as with the Orient. It was, to a great degree, a trade with mass products – agricultural (a.o. cattle) and forest (wax) goods, cheap textiles, furs, etc, destined for large consumption. Thus the network of the fairs constituted a basic organisation serving the needs of the mass scale European trade. In the emergence of the fairly dense network of international fairs, which gave foreign and local merchants an excellent opportunity to meet and exchange goods and money, Polish historians (H. Samsonowicz, J. Topolski)⁴ see a characteristic feature of the whole Polish economy at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Modern Era. Polish fairs were connected with fairs held in Lithuania (Vilna), Mohylev (White Ruthenia), Kamienec Podolski (Ukraine) and served to collect goods coming from the North-East (Russian furs) as well as from the South-East (Ukrainian and Wallachian cattle, oriental goods). On the Western side they were connected with fairs in Breslau (Silesia) and Frankfurt on the Oder (Germany); those places constituted (besides Danzig) the "doors" for Poland to the Western Europe.

3. THE NETWORK OF FAIRS

The most important fairs in 16th century Poland were held in Posen, Gnesen, Thorn, Danzig, Cracow, Brest of Lithuania, Jaroslaw (Yaroslav), Lublin and Zamość (see map 1). Besides those large fairs there were several smaller ones held in such towns as Łęczyca, Kłodawa, Inowrocław, Szadek, Wieluń in Wielkopolska (Great Poland), Radom, Stężyca, Silec, Sandomierz, Kazimierz Dolny in Małopolska (Little Poland) and Drohiczyn in Podlachia, etc. Smaller fairs played the role of intermediaries connecting the big centres; they also served the local trade. It is clearly evident, that smaller fairs were concentrated in the middle of the

² See I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, New York 1974, vol. I, pp. 300ff.

³ In: *The Fontana Economic History of Europe. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. C.M. Cipolla, Glasgow 1976, p. 427.

⁴ H. Samsonowicz, Jarmarki w Polsce na tle sytuacji gospodarczej w Europie w XV-XVI w. (Fairs in Poland against the Background of the European Economic Situation in the 15th-16th Centuries), in: *Europa-Słowiańszczyzna-Polska*, Poznań 1970, pp. 523-532; J. Topolski, Faktoren der Entstehung eines Internationalen Jahrmarktnetzes in Polen im 16. Jh., *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, vol. 5, 1970, pp. 106-116.

country, while big fairs were held on the borders. The special concentrations of important, big fairs can be seen, on the one hand, on the South-Eastern pole of the Polish borderlands (Lublin-Zamość-Lvov-Jaroslav (Yaroslav), on the other – on their North-Western pole (Posen-Gnesen-Thorn). Danzig with its seaborne trade played a special role in the network of fairs.

4. GOODS AND MONEY EXCHANGE AS WELL AS CREDIT OPERATION – THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF FAIRS

The functions of fairs could be explained on some examples. Two big Gnesen fairs (in the spring on St. Adalbert day and in the fall on St. Bartholomeus day), together with Posen fairs (in the spring on first Sunday of Lent, in summer on St. John's day, in the fall St. Michel's day and St. Lucia's day) were the focus of the great overland trade conducted between Germany, Poland, Lithuania, White Ruthenia and Russia.⁵ Here met merchants from Danzig, Warsaw, Lublin, Zamość, Brest of Lithuania, Vilna, Mohylev, Minsk and Breslau. The scale of turnover was very large: at the beginning of the 17th century it came in Gnesen alone to 700-800 thousand different kinds of furs (calaber, ermine, mink, fox, wolf, beaver), about 50 thousand hides (oxen, cow, kid, etc), several thousand fur coats and fur caps yearly. Topolski estimates that 25 per cent of the whole fur export from Poland to the West went through Gnesen fairs. From Silesia, Moravia and Germany textiles (cheaper than those imported via Danzig), metal- huckster- and colonial goods were brought to Gnesen and Posen. They were to be resold in Poland as well as in Lithuania and Ruthenia.

On a similar scale were the four fairs held yearly in Lublin (three in spring: Monday after Purification of St. Mary, on the Anunciation, at Whitsuntide, and one in the fall, on St. Simon and Juda day). To these fairs came merchants from Poland (Cracow, Lvov, Zamość, Danzig), from Lithuania and White Ruthenia (Vilna, Brest, Słuck, Pinsk, Minsk, Mohylev), from Muscovy, from Oriental countries as well as from Central and Western Europe. The global turnover was on the one hand furs and hides, honey, wax, linen, tallow, cattle, on the other: textiles, metal goods (knives, scythes), wines, fruits (raisins, almonds, nuts, prunes etc.).⁶

Danzig held three fairs (one in spring, at mid-Lent, two in the fall – St. Dominic's and St. Martin's days). But of really great importance was the large Dominic's fair in August. An Italian, Ruggieri, who came to Danzig in the second half of the 16th century wrote: "In the month of August a large fair is held there, beginning on St. Dominic's day and lasting for 14 or more days. Coming to the fair

⁵ J. Topolski, *Rola Gniezna w handlu europejskim od XV do XVII wieku* (The Role of Gniezno in European Trade from 15th till 17th Century), *Studia i Materiały do Dziejów Wielkopolski i Pomorza*, vol. 7, no 2, 1962, pp. 72 ff.

⁶ See *Dzieje Lubelszczyzny* (History of the Lublin Region), ed. T. Mencil, vol. I, Warszawa 1974, pp. 279ff.

are Germans, Frenchmen, Flamands, Englishmen, Portuguese, and in the harbour more than 400 ships are berthed, their bottoms loaded with French and Spanish wines, silk, olive oil, lemons, preserved fruits and other produce of Spain, Portuguese spices, tin and cloth from England. In Danzig they find warehouses full of wheat, rye and other grains, flax, hemp, wax, honey, potash, timber, salted beef and other, less bulky products which the merchants load into emptied ships. This goes on during the first eight days of the fair, while during the last eight days and throughout the whole year, not only Polish merchants but many others converge on Danzig to stock their shops and homes with wines, cloth, spices and other goods. In the spring they ship grain and other products, which are surplus at home, to Danzig and sell wholesale to Danzig merchants who put them in store in readiness for the next fair. As these merchants alone may conduct such trade, they are immensely rich, and there is no other city from which the Polish King might draw more money."⁷

In the 16th century a big role was played also by the fairs of Thorn (twice each year, in January and October). The merchants from Danzig, Posen, Warsaw and Lublin were met there as well as merchants from Lithuania and Ruthenia, from Silesia (Breslau), Austria (Vienna), England and Scotland.⁸ The turnover englobed furs, wax, honey, hides, textiles, metal and colonial goods. Fairs of Lvov and Zamość had great turnover with oriental goods and were a meeting place for Armenian, Persian, Greek and Jewish merchants. Of importance for cattle bred in Ukraine and Moldavia were the fairs in Jaroslaw (Yaroslav), Lublin, Łęczyca and Warsaw. The oxen were brought further to Silesia and Germany as well as to Pomerania (Danzig). The trade with cattle was mostly in the hands of Ruthenians, Armenians and Jews.⁹

Since in great trade different coins were used, the merchants had to exchange them during the fairs. These soon became financial centres for receiving, changing and borrowing money and professional money-changers acted among merchants. Money exchange soon became linked with credit operations.

H. Samsonowicz underlines, that fairs helped to spread the use of bills-of-exchange, as well as the use of clearings units, such as pounds, Russian marks, and Polish zlotys.¹⁰ Since the major commercial fairs brought together merchants from many different areas and since it was inconvenient for them to settle all their transactions in cash, it was customary to buy goods during the fairs on credit. Supposedly, in the 16th century already about 60 per cent of all transactions

⁷ *Relacje nuncjuszy apostolskich i innych osób o Polsce od 1548 do 1690* (Accounts by Apostolic Nuncios and Others Concerning Poland from 1548 to 1690), ed. A. Rykaczewski, Berlin 1864, p. 211.

⁸ L. Koczy, *Dzieje wewnętrzne Torunia do 1794 r.* (The Internal History of the City of Thorn till 1794), in: *Dzieje Torunia*, Toruń 1933, pp. 181ff.

⁹ M. Bogucka, H. Samsonowicz, *Dzieje miast i mieszczaństwa w Polsce przedrozbiorowej* (History of Towns and Town-dwellers in Poland before Partitions), Wrocław 1986, pp. 419ff. J. Baszanowski, *Z dziejów handlu polskiego w XVI-XVIII w. Handel wołami* (From the History of the Polish Trade in the 16th-18th Centuries. Oxen Trade), Gdańsk 1977, passim.

¹⁰ H. Samsonowicz, *Jarmarki*, p. 524.

performed during St. Dominic's fair in Danzig involved credit operations. Financial dealings at the Danzig fairs involved transfers from the Netherlands, England and Germany. During the fairs in Gnesen, Thorn and Cracow, German and Italian bills-of-exchange circulated. During fairs their participants created and prolonged debts as well as settled them, and to some merchants dealing in commodities was even less important than dealing in money. Credit operations were not restricted to merchants only. Polish noblemen looked out for loans during fairs in Danzig and in Thorn, Posen, Warsaw, Lublin, Lvov and Zamość. This was connected with the custom of selling manorial goods on delayed delivery, which was a common practice all over Poland: the nobleman promising his payment for some goods in grain from the yield of the following year's harvest. In the first half of the 17th century 75 per cent of grain brought to Danzig every year was already such a debt-payment grain.¹¹ The merchant-to-merchant credit transaction, as well as merchant to nobleman credit established an inter-regional and international network of financial links and interdependencies not only of short duration. Fairs were usually a convenient occasion to settle all financial affairs from previous years as well as to build new credit structures for the months and years to come.

5. ORGANISATION OF FAIRS

The usual duration of fairs was from one to two weeks; though, some were longer (up to six weeks) and others shorter (2-3 days). The official fixed duration was often extended by some foreigners staying longer in the city, trying to conclude their business on the benefit from the freedom of the fairs. We have many such examples from Danzig, Thorn, Warsaw etc. Most of fairs in Poland were held in the spring or in the autumn; this was connected with the agricultural character of the economy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well as with the best time to use landroads.

The basic principle of the fairs' organisation – the general freedom of action for foreign merchants and the suspension of privileges granted to local citizens – was controlled by the town's authorities who tried to limit any abuse of these privileges. Special jurisdiction controlled trade and behaviour of participants (from 200-300 to 1-2 thousand people) limiting opportunities for commercial frauds and cheating as well as ordinary thievery. The problem of criminality during fairs, however, still needs proper research.

In most centres there were not many permanent facilities built especially for fairs. Mostly they were only places and squares where traditionally carts and trucks were collocated and temporary stalls and booths constructed. Around such places

¹¹ M. Bogucka, *Gdańskie kontrakty zbożowe w pierwszej połowie XVII w.* (Grain Purchase Contracts in Danzig in the First Half of the 17th Century), *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, 1969, no. 4, pp. 711–719.

numerous taverns and pubs flourished at the time of a fair. Foreign merchants stayed in the houses of local burghers, which gave the latter additional possibility to earn some extra money during the fair.

6. TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 17TH CENTURY AND IN THE 18TH CENTURY

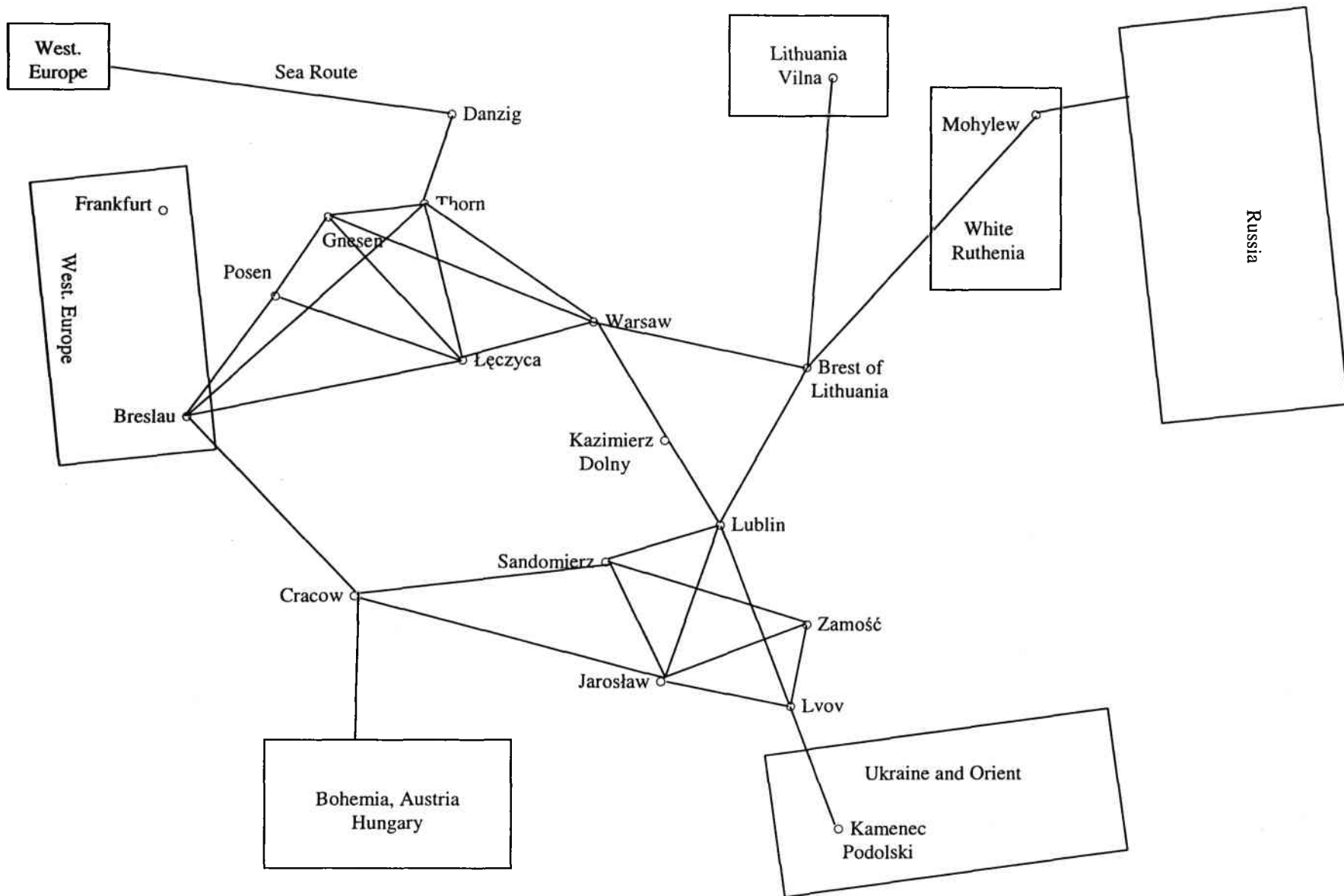
The network of fairs built in the 16th century on the base of great transit trade between the West and the East (furs, wax, oriental items) as well as of Polish overland imports (textiles, metal and colonial goods) and exports (cattle, hides) began to change in the 17th century. The crucial point was the middle of the 17th century, when the wars devastating Polish lands had brought an end to the prosperity of Polish economy and to Polish foreign trade. The beginning of the economic crisis could, however, be felt already in the first half of the 17th century, with the visible decline of the fairs of Thorn.¹² In the middle of the 18th century Polish economy began to recover. The network of fairs emerged again, but their emergence resulted from the new needs of trade.

According to B. Grochulska¹³ it was a network much more dense than in the 16th century (see map 2). Grochulska lists more than 350 fairs on the territory of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years 1776-1788. Many towns, even very small ones, were in those times granted the privilege to hold a fair in the hope this would enliven their economic life. The duration of some fairs was prolonged for 68 weeks. It seems, however, that we have now to do with a different phenomenon than in the 16th century. Fairs in the 18th century to a very small degree only served the needs of a large, long-distance (interregional and international) trade. They were mostly centres of local trade with agrarian and forest products. The role of merchants – especially Polish merchants – during fairs seems to decline. Instead of town-dwellers, noblemen and factors of great magnates met with foreign merchants; this phenomenon corresponds with the decline of Polish towns and Polish burghers, and the growing role of Jewish merchants during fairs, because the Jews often served Polish magnates and gentry as commercial factors and agents. Some of the old, large fairs almost completely lost their old character. The most known example are Lvov's fairs, given in the 18th century a new name: "contracts". The biggest one in January (beginning on St. Agnes' day) constituted a large gathering of noblemen from the whole region, during which all financial affairs were settled (buying and selling of landed property, loans and credit operations, marriage contracts etc).¹⁴ Trading was clearly relegated to the margin of

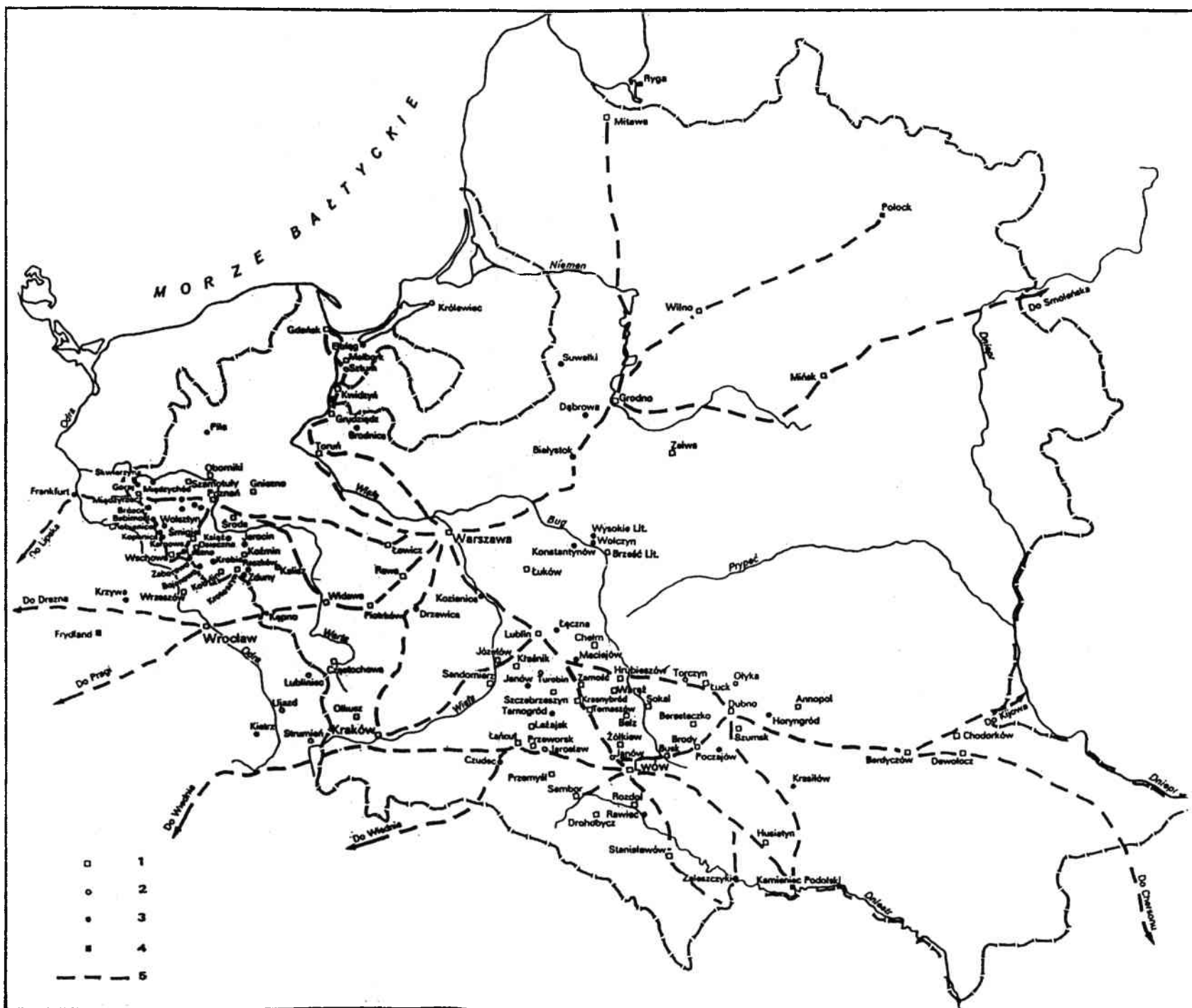
¹² See L. Koczy, *op. cit.*

¹³ B. Grochulska, *Jarmarki w handlu polskim w drugiej połowie XVIII w. (Fairs in the Polish Trade in the Second Half of the 18th Century)*, *Przegląd Historyczny*, vol. 64, 1973, no. 4, pp. 793–820.

¹⁴ J. Bielecka, *Kontrakty lwowskie w latach 1768-1775 (The Contracts of Lvov in the Years 1768–1775)*, Poznań 1948, *passim*.



Map 1. Main Fairs and Trade Routes in the 16th Century Poland



Map 2. Fairs and Trade Routes in the Years 1776-1788

1. Fairs in towns with male convents 2. Fairs in towns with decanats 3. Fairs in towns without convents and decanats 4. Other settlements with fairs 5. Main routes. Source: B. Grochulska, *Jarmarki w handlu polskim w drugiej połowie XVIII w.* "Przegląd historyczny", 1973, no. 4, pp. 793-820

this gathering – it existed mostly in the form of sale of manorial products and purchase of items needed in the nobles' households. Wintertime was chosen because it was the season when farming came to a standstill. Similar transformations as in Lvov could be seen in the character of Lublin, Zamość, Sandomierz, Kazimierz Dolny and Łęczyca fairs. Most of fairs in those years became simply centres for local trade, conducted by nobles, and centres for negotiating credit. In fact, many fairs were reduced to the simple market role, at the same time losing their importance in great international trade. This transformation explains the growing number of fairs despite the declining importance of the Polish lands in international commerce and in world economy.

7. FAIRS AND CULTURE

From their very beginnings fairs were an important cultural event, not only because they were an excellent occasion to meet strangers, to exchange information and ideas, and to observe foreign customs. A very important problem for research in the future is the trade in books, maps, paintings, different items of pleasure and entertainment such as chessboards, playing cards, dice, toys, musical instruments, objects of cult, etc. It seems that especially during St. Dominic's fair in Danzig, as well as during St. Agnes' fair in Lvov the trade in such "cultural" items was of very large dimensions. Early newspapers and leaflets were also distributed during fairs as well as cheap printed pictures. Strolling painters often performed their skill and art at fairs. The latter were also a place and time where and while the new trends in fashion and likings were diffused, relating to dress, hairstyle, cosmetics, jewels, arms, weapons and even behaviour.

During fairs some scholars such as doctors of medicine and astronomers-astrologers used to produce their knowledge, offering drugs, prognostics and calendars. It was a time for the culture of the elites and popular culture to meet and influence each other. The learned science mixed with popular beliefs and spread among larger circles of adherents. Many serious medical operations were performed (especially in Danzig and Thorn) and new helpful medicines and treatments were introduced during fairs, numerous simple interventions performed by barbers and surgeons. At the same time many quacks presented their sometime mysterious services.¹⁵ On the whole we can assume that fairs played a significant role in the development of early modern medicine.

The time of a fair was inevitably a time of entertainment. Spectacles given by strolling musicians and actors, singers, acrobats, jugglers, trainers of their performing animals (e.g. bears) as well as by local jesters were all a customary part of the fair's life. In the 18th century when fairs were, to a high degree, monopolised

¹⁵ See M. Bogucka, *Illness and Death in a Maritime City: Gdańsk in the Seventeenth Century*, *The American Neptune*, vol. 51, no. 2, Spring 1991, pp. 91–104.

by nobles, they became an excellent occasion for intensive social life with balls, dances and fiestas, theatrical spectacles etc.

From their very beginning fairs were also closely associated with religious life. The timetable of fairs was constructed not only for the needs of an agricultural year, but linked also to the liturgical year. The days of popular saints were chosen as the time of a fair and vast religious ceremonies (often connected with distribution of indulgences) were at the core of many fairs (since the other name of a fair – “kermis”, in Polish – “odpust”). B. Grochulska underlines an interesting phenomenon of correlation in the 18th century between the existence of a male convent and Church administrative unit (decanat) and the existence of a fair (see map 2).

8. CONCLUSION

Development of Polish fairs in the early modern times should be divided into two periods: 1. 16th-first half of the 17th c. when they were a part of the international trade network, connecting the East with the West of Europe, 2. Second half of the 17th-18th century, when the network of Polish fairs became more dense, but at the same time it was losing its links with the European trade institutions and with the European economy. Polish fairs, monopolised step by step by the nobles and adopted to their needs, begin to change their character from merchants' gatherings to gentry's assemblies, from commercial centres on an international scale to centres for regional trade and credit operations serving the local nobility. It was in fact a degeneration of Polish fairs into local markets, dominated by noblemen. The process corresponded with the general decline of fairs in the whole of Europe, but had different causes. While the decline of West-European fairs resulted from the transformation of the international trade organisation, and from its modernisation, in Poland it was caused by internal factors mostly, and was connected with the economic and social crisis in Poland.